

At 50-year mark, institute still has a heart for kids



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St. Louis Park High students, from left, Arif Mohamed, 17, Samantha Timmerman, 16, and Elizabeth Santiago, 16, participated in an exercise developed by Search Institute, which focuses on the whole youth.

● The Search Institute is a Minneapolis-based nonprofit whose research and seminars benefit youth across the country.

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In a suburban Minneapolis high school, a group of low-income and minority students meets with teachers for an “emotional check-in” to discuss advanced courses they’re taking and their college plans. Several states away, educators in Houston help teens whose families relocated there after Hurricane Katrina adjust to their new lives.

While they’re separated by hundreds of miles, these programs and countless other youth initiatives in the United States are influenced by

the work of the Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that recently celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Search Institute evolved from a Midwestern youth survey organization in the late 1950s to a nationally renowned child and adolescent development agency in the late 1980s and 1990s. Today, Search Institute resources are used by more than 10,000 U.S. schools and youth agencies.

According to youth development experts, Search Institute’s key contribution is a pioneering framework of 40 “developmental assets,” or qualities that all kids should possess, whether they live in a penthouse or a tenement. They were developed by Peter L. Benson, Search

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St. Louis Park High students, from left, Tsultrim Gyaltso, 17, Arif Mohamed, 17, and Ari O'Sullivan, 16, searched through a box filled with items needed for the ACT exam during a team relay exercise. St. Louis Park High is one of many schools across the nation that has implemented Search Institute's highly praised approach.

Search's approach to youth still relevant

◀ SEARCH FROM B1

Institute's president and CEO.

At first glance, the nonprofit's developmental assets are deceptively simple. They include the need for a caring school climate, a sense of purpose and strong relationships with at least three non-parent adults.

But youth experts said Search Institute's philosophy represented a groundbreaking research-backed road map that reshaped the way many schools, governments and other agencies work with youth.

"Before he [Benson] came onto the scene, America defined positive development in young people as the absence of problems," said Richard Lerner, director of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University in Boston. "Imagine if your boss said you've done a good job today simply because you didn't embarrass them or burn down the office."

Focus on resources, not problems

The St. Louis Park School District used Search Institute principles to restructure its high school in the 1990s. Today some of its student-centered programs, including efforts on behalf of low-income and minority youths, are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

"Search is one of the few agen-

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Richard Lerner, on promoting positive development in youth.

cies that looks at kids as resources rather than problems that need to be fixed," said Angela Jerabek, director of St. Louis Park High School's ninth-grade and small learning communities programs.

Terrence Chastan-Davis, a junior at St. Louis Park High, said teachers and other staff at his school are supportive, and he doesn't hesitate to approach them about school work or other issues outside of class.

The 16-year-old said teachers encouraged him to apply to join an after-school program called Admission Possible. It helps low-income juniors and seniors prepare for the ACT, manage their course work and navigate the college admission process. St. Louis Park students in the program meet with college coaches at least twice a week.

"If I'd never gotten into this [program], I wouldn't be thinking about college," he said.

Signature contribution

Benson created the developmen-

tal assets in the late 1980s and 1990s. Benson joined Search Institute in 1978 as a lead researcher. At the time, the nonprofit had 12 employees and a budget of less than a half-million dollars. Today it employs more than 50 people and has an annual budget of roughly \$8 million.

He has written and edited more than a dozen books on child and adolescent development. His latest book, "Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers," contains a foreword by Alma Powell, wife of former Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell and chair of the America's Promise Alliance. The national nonprofit facilitates volunteer programs for youth nationwide.

"It isn't the only thing we do but our signature contribution is to bring to the world this universal framework [of developmental assets]," Benson said. "Scientific studies show the 40 assets matter for all kids across race, ethnicity and family income whether they live in New

York or Abilene, Kansas."

In Texas, Search Institute has also built close relationships with schools and youth agencies, said Pat Rosenberg, of Houston, who is a member of the Texas Association of Partners in Education.

Search Institute trained Houston school counselors to develop methods to emphasize the importance of building positive relationships with students. Houston students, including teens who moved there after Hurricane Katrina, have traveled to Search Institute youth conferences.

"We knew that even the custodians can have a positive, lasting impact on kids," Rosenberg said.

As the Obama administration settles into Washington and works to foster more opportunities for children and teens, Lerner said the work of youth development agencies could gain more traction. Search Institute is a pillar of that movement, Lerner said.

"In his notion of youth development [Benson and the Search Institute] have given communities and families hands-on actions they can take to improve the lives of young people," Lerner said. "If there was a medal that we gave out in the youth development field, he would be first in line to get."

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